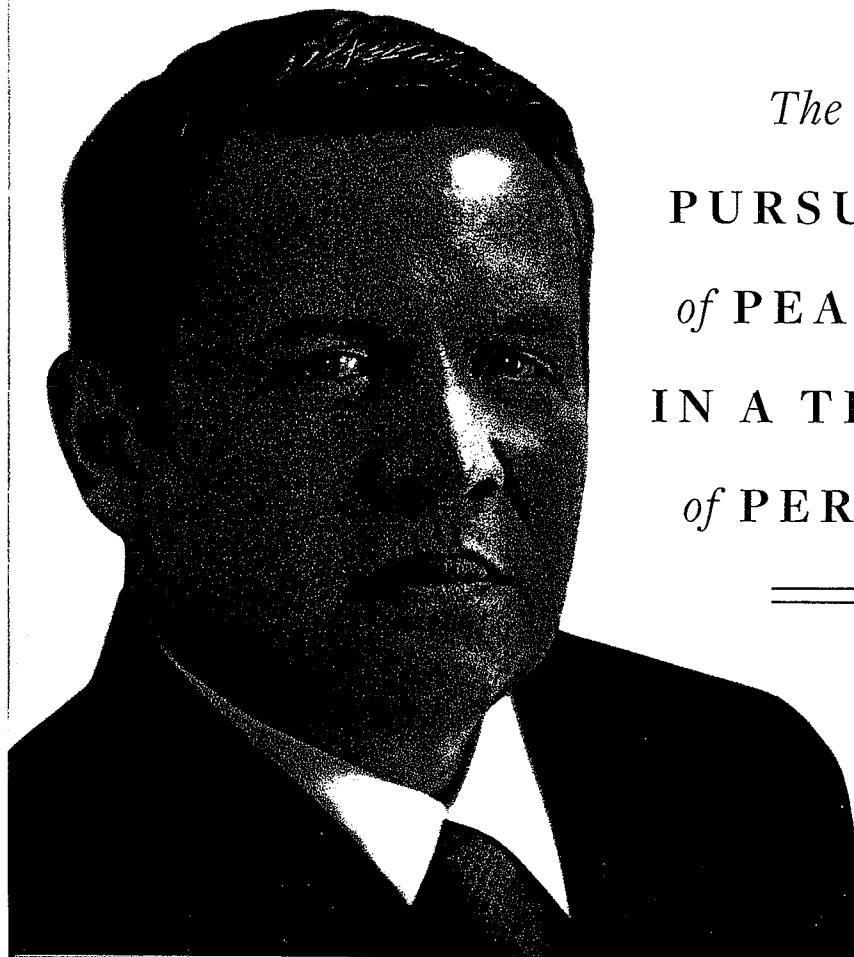


Our Last Best Chance



The
PURSUIT
of PEACE
IN A TIME
of PERIL

King Abdullah II of Jordan

VIKING

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Chapter 2

The 1967 War

From my room, I heard a muffled bang, followed by several others. Grabbing my telescope, I ran down the corridor to the window. I could see a black column of smoke in the distance and heard another explosion, this time louder. Israeli jets were attacking Palestinian guerrillas outside Salt, a town fifteen miles northwest of Amman. My father rushed up and took the telescope from me. After twisting it and realizing that it was a toy, he impatiently threw it to the floor and ran off to change into his military uniform.

I was five years old and this was my first experience of war. About forty minutes later I heard the staccato cough of anti-aircraft guns as the Jordanian army fired at the Israeli planes.

When my father returned that evening, he looked distraught and went straight into his bedroom. Although I was young, I could sense something was terribly wrong. I followed him and found him sitting on the bed with his face in his hands. He looked up as I entered, and I could see that his eyes were damp. That was one of the very few times I ever saw my father cry. I asked him what was wrong and why there was so much noise and so many airplanes flying overhead.

He patiently explained that the Israelis were trying to hit Palestinian guerrilla fighters who were living in Jordan. I had no understanding at that time as to what guerrillas were or why the Israelis were trying to kill them. All I knew was that things were bad. Rather than selecting specific military targets, the Israelis were bombing communities full of families, devastating the roads and houses.

Many of their munitions did not explode immediately. My father told me about a little girl who, thinking the danger was over, had

approached one of the bombs; it then exploded. He rushed to free her from the rubble, but when he dug her out he found that she was badly injured. She had lost one of her legs. Gently cradling her, he ran to a nearby ambulance, but it was too late. She died in his arms.

We lived in a small, tree-lined compound in a district called Hummar, twenty minutes up into the hills outside of Amman. The relative seclusion provided some protection from those who wanted to hurt us, but not from Israeli planes: for that we had to rely on four .50 caliber quad guns mounted on turrets in the garden. The soldiers manning the guns kindly allowed my four-year-old brother, Feisal, and me to think we were part of the defensive effort. Our job was to carry oil cans and lubricate the guns if they started firing. We enjoyed our role as the most junior members of the military unit—an association that came to an abrupt halt when someone showed my mother a photo of us posing by the guns with cigarettes dangling from our mouths. My mother still lives in that house, but the area where the anti-aircraft guns were is now a vegetable garden; one gun was mounted on what is now a compost heap.

Although as a child I could perceive the emotional impact of the war, at that time I had little idea of its meaning and implications.

In the spring of 1967 it was already clear to many in the region that Israel and its Arab neighbors were racing headlong toward a collision. In November 1966 Israeli forces launched a devastating attack on Samu, a village near Hebron, as a reprisal for the killing by landmine of three soldiers, raising concerns in Amman about Israeli intentions. In early May, President Nasser deployed troops in the Sinai Peninsula and requested that the UN remove its peacekeeping troops (the United Nations Emergency Force, UNEF) from the Sinai, where they had been positioned since the Suez crisis more than a decade earlier. Not long after that, he closed the Straits of Tiran, Israel's only access to the Red Sea, to Israeli shipping.

The Arab forces were not a cohesive army but a collection of separate national armies that had recently joined together. Following

a series of failed attempts at closer political union among the Arab states during the 1960s, the Egyptians, the Syrians, and the Iraqis had joined their militaries together to form the United Arab Command in 1964. Egypt and Syria then signed a defense treaty in November 1966.

In late May 1967, sensing the looming possibility of a conflict, and given the highly charged Arab nationalist sentiment at the time, my father felt he had no choice but to announce his support for Arab leaders in the face of Israeli aggression. He went to Cairo and, in a fateful decision, committed Jordan to a mutual defense treaty with Egypt. From then on, the Jordanian Armed Forces would be under the command of an Egyptian officer, General Abdul Monim Riad. The Israelis decided on a preemptive strike, claiming that Nasser was planning to attack. They had already prepared the way.

At that time, the Middle East was a focus of intense competition between the rival superpowers locked in a cold war. The region was divided into two broad areas of influence: a pro-Soviet camp, led by Nasser and the Egyptians, and a pro-Western camp, to which my father belonged. According to declassified U.S. documents, on June 1, 1967, General Meir Amit, the head of the Mossad, the Israeli foreign intelligence service, visited Washington, D.C., and met with Richard Helms, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Drawing upon American fears of Soviet expansionism, Amit portrayed Egypt and Nasser as a threat not just to Israel but to the whole region. According to Helms, Amit's view was that the Egyptian president would, if left unimpeded, draw the entire Middle East into the Soviet sphere of influence. Jordan's forced accommodation with Egypt was by this logic a sign of things to come. Saudi Arabia and Lebanon would be next, after which it would be the turn of Turkey and Iran. Even Tunisia and Morocco would eventually topple to Nasser. Summarizing their conversation in a memo to U.S. president Lyndon Johnson, Helms said, "Amit thinks the Israelis' decision will be to strike."

General Amit's visit was a warning from Israel to America. Unless President Johnson told them not to do so, Israel would attack Egypt.

On June 3, President Johnson wrote to Prime Minister Levi Eshkol of Israel, saying, "I must emphasize the necessity for Israel not to make itself responsible for the initiation of hostilities." Then Johnson added, "We have completely and fully exchanged views with General Amit." The next day Amit returned to Israel, and Johnson's letter was delivered to the Israeli government.

One of Israel's greatest talents has been exaggerating the threat posed by countries it considers strategic enemies, perpetuating the story of it being a tiny nation surrounded by hostile powers. This myth has allowed the Israelis to portray their own calculated acts of aggression as self-defense and, in some cases, to persuade other nations to attack its enemies in its stead.

In 1967, in military terms, Israel was certainly a match for its Arab adversaries. The Israeli army was some 300,000 strong, with 800 tanks and 197 fighter aircraft. The combined Arab armies had some 240,000 men, 900 tanks, and 385 aircraft of all types. But simply comparing combat strength is misleading. For one thing, the largest Arab army, the Egyptian army, at over 100,000 strong, had around one-fifth of its men in Yemen at the time, supporting the Republican forces in the ongoing civil war. By telling the Americans that Egypt posed a threat to the entire region, Israel had at best misled and at worst purposefully lied to a nation that was and still is one of its closest allies.

Learning of the impending conflict from NATO intelligence, Turkey's ambassador to Jordan warned my father of an imminent Israeli attack. My father immediately told Nasser, who refused to heed the warning.

In implementation of the defense pact Jordan had entered with Egypt, General Riad assumed command of our armed forces. He was at a severe disadvantage, as he did not know the terrain in Jordan or Palestine well, nor did he have a good sense of the capabilities of the men under his command. In addition, he took his orders from Cairo, not Amman. If Israel were to attack Egypt, Riad would order Jordanian troops into battle, and we would be at war with Israel.

On June 5, 1967, Israeli jets flew into Egypt and struck at the

Egyptian air force. Egyptian planes were not their only targets. That same day two Israeli Mystère jets attacked the royal palace in Amman, targeting my father's private office with rockets and machine-gun fire. Thankfully, he was at army headquarters at the time. If he had been at the palace, he would have been killed.

Our whole extended family, including my uncle Prince Muhammad and his two sons, Talal and Ghazi, lived in our house during the war, camping out in sleeping bags in the basement. My uncle Muhammad, who was in charge of my father's security, slept on the floor with a machine gun outside my father's bedroom. To a five-year-old it all seemed like a great adventure; I was too young to understand the tragic events that were unfolding.

One afternoon my brother Feisal and I were hiding in the basement with assorted aunts, cousins, and other relatives. It was another Israeli air raid, and we could hear the explosions outside. My brother dared me to run across the lawn, touch the fence, and return. With Feisal goading me on, I dashed onto the lawn and ran as fast as my legs would carry me. There was a huge explosion. I burst into tears and ran back into the house.

Throughout the day of June 5, 1967, the Israeli air force attacked our bases in Amman and Mafrq, destroying our landing fields and our fleet of Hawker Hunter aircraft. For the next two days Jordanian forces fought bravely to defend the West Bank and East Jerusalem, but, outmanned and outgunned, and with no air cover, they were overwhelmed by the Israelis. The Royal Jordanian Air Force also did an amazing job considering its limited resources and the superiority of Israeli airpower, shooting down eight Israeli planes and launching two attacks on central Israeli cities. It was the only Arab air force that downed Israeli planes during this war.

Pressing on, the Israeli armed forces, commanded by Yitzhak Rabin, attempted to seize control of the whole of the West Bank. Determined to be on the front line, my father headed down to the Jordan Valley to be with his men. When he got there, a terrible sight

awaited him, which he later described: "Roads clogged with trucks, jeeps, and all kinds of vehicles twisted, disemboweled, dented, still smoking, giving off that particular smell of metal and paint burned by exploding bombs—a stink that only powder can make."

Throughout the evening of June 5 and into the next day our soldiers and tank drivers, including the 40th Armoured Brigade in which I would later serve as a young soldier, showed great courage, but they were helpless under the bombardment of Israeli fighters. Most of their tanks were destroyed by Israeli bombs. My father later described the battle, saying, "That night was hell. It was clear as day. The sky and the earth glowed with the light of the rockets and the constant explosions of the bombs pouring from Israeli planes."

The war was disastrous for Jordan and for other Arab states. When the fighting stopped on June 10, Israel had taken the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip from Egypt, and the Golan Heights from Syria. Much of the territory it seized in 1967 is still illegally occupied by Israel today. Some two hundred thousand to three hundred thousand Palestinians crossed to the East Bank of the River Jordan, increasing the total number of Palestinian refugees in Jordan to around three-quarters of a million. The Jordanian Armed Forces were devastated. Seven hundred were killed and some six thousand wounded, and we lost all of our air force and most of our tanks. Following the end of the war, Jordan's weakened armed forces underwent a vigorous program of restructuring and retraining, assisted by a Pakistani advisory mission headed by Brigadier Zia-ul-Haq, who later became president of Pakistan.

Seizing the West Bank was in no way necessary if Israel simply intended to respond to a perceived threat from Egypt. But Israeli leaders wanted defense in depth, as they put it, so when the chance arose to acquire more territory, they took it. And once they had it, they were determined to hang on to it.

The consequences of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem continue to resonate across the region and the world to

this day. The loss of Jerusalem was particularly painful to my father. My family belongs to the Prophet Mohammad's branch of the Quraish tribe and directly descends from the Prophet through the male line of his elder grandson, Al Hasan. ("Hashem" was actually the great-grandfather of the Prophet; hence the family name, "Hashemites.") From AD 965 until 1925 the Hashemites ruled the Hijaz in western Arabia and served as the guardians of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, making us the second-oldest ruling dynasty in the world after the Japanese imperial family. As the head of the Hashemite family, responsible for safeguarding Jerusalem, my father was devastated by his inability to protect Jerusalem and the Al Aqsa Mosque, one of the three holiest sites in Islam, from the encroaching Israeli army.

As soon as the war ended, the negotiations for peace began. The Arab Summit in Khartoum in late August, though famous for its "three nos"—no to peace, no to recognition of Israel, and no to negotiation with Israel—had in fact provided a framework for the pursuit of diplomacy. Talks in November continued at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York, home of the U.S. ambassador to the UN, Arthur Goldberg, who hosted private meetings between the Israeli, Egyptian, and Jordanian delegations. A former justice of the Supreme Court, the ambassador was a prominent supporter of Israel and as such was viewed with suspicion by my father and the Egyptians. Their suspicion turned out to be justified.

According to notes from one of my father's close advisers who was involved in the discussions, Goldberg sent an oral message to my father that if the Arabs would accept a UN Security Council resolution, the United States would push for Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories, and that any changes to the prewar borders would be "minor, reciprocal border rectifications." Goldberg indicated that the Israelis were onboard. My father flew to Cairo and discussed the proposal with Nasser, who asked him to support the resolution.

In early November my father returned to New York to meet with the UN secretary-general, U Thant, and to confer with the other

Arab delegations in the run-up to the next Security Council meeting. He met with President Johnson at the White House on November 8; then, after spending ten days in the United States, he left for Europe. The final result of the negotiations, UN Resolution 242, was adopted by the UN Security Council in a unanimous vote on November 22, 1967. The resolution called for Israel's withdrawal from territories (the Arabic text called for withdrawal from "the" territories, while the English text spoke only of territories) it had occupied in exchange for peace, thereby launching the land-for-peace formula that would underpin Jordan's future foreign policy. The resolution's preamble stressed the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force and said:

[T]he fulfillment of Charter principles requires the establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East which should include the application of both the following principles:

- (i) Withdrawal of Israeli Armed Forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict;
- (ii) Termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgment of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force.

The resolution also made clear the necessity of achieving a just settlement of the refugee problem. Over forty years later, UN Security Resolution 242, which Jordan played an important role in formulating, is still the primary reference point for building a lasting peace between the Israelis and Palestinians.

For most of the Arab world the conflict was over, but for those of us living in Jordan the troubles were just beginning. Another storm was brewing, only this time, rather than involving an external enemy, it would set brother against brother.

Chapter 3

Dark Clouds over Amman

In the aftermath of the 1967 war some three hundred thousand refugees from the West Bank poured into Jordan. Yasser Arafat, a Palestinian who had lived in Egypt before moving to Kuwait in 1957, where he cofounded the Fatah movement before relocating to Syria in the early 1960s, also moved to Jordan in the aftermath of the war. Fatah, along with a number of armed Palestinian factions loosely gathered under the umbrella of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), began to call for armed resistance against Israel. Fatah and other Palestinian guerrillas, known as the fedayeen, recruited disaffected young men from the refugee camps and began launching attacks across the Jordan River against Israeli forces.

The following year, the Israeli army decided to hit back. In the early hours of the morning of March 21, 1968, expecting an easy victory, Israel sent two armored brigades across the River Jordan. Their plan was to strike at the refugee camp at Karameh, twenty miles west of Amman, where some of these Palestinian fedayeen were based, and then to continue on toward the capital. The Jordanian army, which was still recovering from the 1967 war, engaged the Israeli forces in fierce fighting and inflicted heavy enough losses on them that in a few hours they started screaming for a cease-fire. My father insisted that there would be no cease-fire until the last Israeli soldier withdrew from Karameh. Fifteen hours after the attack, the Israeli invading troops completed their withdrawal in tattered regiments. In the battle of Karameh, the Israelis suffered their first defeat by an Arab army. Although the fedayeen took part in the fighting, the victory was achieved by the army. But Arafat and his guerrillas were

quick to claim the credit. They soon came to believe in their own rhetoric and to flex their muscles, so much so that the fedayeen, as an armed movement, began to represent a challenge to the country. They threatened security, broke laws, and sought to establish a state within the state.

During the 1950s and early 1960s Jordan was tremendously vulnerable to regional political upheavals. This was the age of Arab nationalism. Revolutionary Nasserites in Egypt and the secular Baathists who took over Syria and Iraq were then very popular. They had grand visions of Arab unity, and their aspirations for geopolitical dominance extended to Jordan. Between the time my father was eighteen, when he became king, and thirty, when I was three years old, there were eighteen documented assassination attempts against him, including two by traitors inside the Royal Court. The assassins were working for Gamal Abdel Nasser and his United Arab Republic, a three-year union between Egypt and Syria (1958–61). The UAR was allied with the Soviet Union. My father was an ally of the West, and by killing him Nasser and the Soviet Union hoped to create instability in Jordan and to push the country into their orbit.

The first inside job involved acid. My father, who was in his mid-twenties at the time, suffered from sinus problems, so he would regularly use saline solution in nose drops. Somebody with access to his personal bathroom switched the saline solution for hydrochloric acid. By accident, one of the containers fell into the sink. When the enamel began to steam and crack under the powerful acid, my father realized that he had narrowly escaped a very painful death.

The second assassination attempt involved poison. My father noticed that dead cats began to litter the palace grounds. When his staff investigated this curious development, they found that an assistant chef in the palace kitchen had been hired to kill him. The chef, a good cook but a poor poisoner, had been practicing his art on the unfortunate cats, trying to judge the correct dose.

Partly because of the high probability that one of these assassins might eventually succeed, and in order to protect the monarchy, my father decided in 1965 to remove the title of crown prince from me

when I was just three years old. He designated his brother Prince Hassan, who was then eighteen, as his successor instead. Although I was oblivious to the change at the time, it was one of the best things he ever did for me, as it allowed me to lead a relatively normal life. One of the few traces of my brief time as heir apparent is a set of stamps with my image as a three-year-old. But I did not need formal titles to enjoy my childhood.

My father had a silver Mercedes-Benz 300SL gull-wing roadster, which he had raced in hill climbs in Lebanon in the 1950s. I loved the way the doors lifted upward like something out of a movie. He was really into fast cars and was always racing around on a motorcycle, in a car—or by helicopter. In those days we did not have the wide array of TV channels that we have today—in fact, there were only two hours of TV a day in Jordan, so we had to make much of our own entertainment. In calmer moments my father, mother, and I would sometimes drive out north. Since my father's 300SL was only a two-seater, I would sit on his lap. Speeding along on desert roads, he would beep the horn to keep the beat as we sang "Popeye the Sailor Man," the theme song to one of my favorite shows. At dusk we often stopped for a picnic next to a wheat field. The soldiers guarding us would go into the field, pick heads of wheat, and roast the kernels on leaves over a wood fire. Ever since then, I have loved the smell of roasting wheat.

Every boy at some level thinks his father is a king. I knew my father was special, and I understood he was a leader, although I did not really comprehend what he did all day. But I cherished those moments we spent together. My parents tried their best to let my brother Feisal and me experience normal lives as children. They would bring us to a small farm down in the Jordan Valley on Fridays, along with friends and their children. Another family activity we enjoyed was target practice. We had a shooting range at the bottom of the garden, and my father, my mother, Feisal, and I would take turns firing at targets.

My mother grew up in an army family. Her father, a British officer, had fought in World War II and after that in Malaya, and had

taught her to shoot as a young girl. She was an excellent shot. When she was a teenager her father was posted to Jordan, and she met my father at a diplomatic reception. She was just nineteen at the time, and he was twenty-five. He was entranced by her beauty and charm and would invite her to the palace from time to time to watch a movie with his mother and family. My mother reciprocated by inviting him to her parents' house, where he was served cakes and strong English tea. They discovered a shared interest in motor sports, and got to know each other better on trips to the Amman Go-Kart Club, where my father taught her to drive. Soon she was competing in the ladies' races. About a year after they first met, my father proposed and, too overcome to speak, she simply nodded her assent. Born Antoinette Gardiner, my mother converted to Islam before the wedding, became a Jordanian citizen, and took the name Muna Al Hussein.

Two days before the wedding they were discussing my mother's future role in the royal family when she said, "Does it sound ridiculous if I say that I don't really want the title of queen?" Delighted that she was marrying for love rather than a title, my father gladly assented, and they were wed on May 25, 1961, in a simple ceremony at Zahran Palace in Amman. After the wedding my mother became Princess Muna, and the next year, I arrived.

Amman in 1968 was not the safest of cities. Yasser Arafat and his guerrilla fighters were launching attacks from Jordanian territory into Israel, and the Israeli army retaliated periodically, striking targets inside Jordan. Apart from Israeli bombs, there were various Egyptians and Syrians with nefarious designs: Soviet-sponsored communist agitators and hired assassins determined to destabilize moderate governments like ours. Amman became a gathering place for all types of radicals, from the German Baader-Meinhof Gang and the Japanese Red Army to the Venezuelan terrorist Carlos the Jackal, many of them attracted by Jordan's proximity to the Israeli-occupied West Bank and the possibility of striking at Israel. With the Jordanian army patrolling the borders, the guerrillas and radicals took over